

Wakefield Chapel
A Historic Account by Bronwyn Deloach

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One of the many historic sites in the Braddock Area is Wakefield Chapel, a non-denominational church in Annandale. It is rare for a family to be so connected to a historic place without knowing, but through research I realized that Wakefield Chapel is a place of my past. I have listened to countless stories of the older generations of my family, reminiscing about the place that they know so well. I will tell these stories here, as my attachment to Wakefield Chapel unfolds.

In 1899, the chapel, once called Ilda Chapel, was erected on land donated by Oliver Besley after the civil war. He was the local sawmill owner, and my great-great-great-grandfather. He and his wife, Mary Besley, not only donated the land, but the building supplies for the chapel. During my research, I found facts about Oliver Besley that touched my heart. When the Chapel was erected, Oliver Besley built a wooden sidewalk from his front door to the front door of the Chapel so that his wife's feet didn't get wet when she went to the Chapel in bad weather. His wife was an active member of the Methodist Church, which is how she had met Reverend Wakefield, for whom the Chapel was named. The land was donated on the condition that it would be used only for church services. My Great-Great-Aunt Elma signed the paper work for the deed to change, so that the land could be used for something other than church services. The land was passed on to Fairfax County, and now has houses and a school on it.

While researching Wakefield Chapel in the Virginia Room at the Fairfax County Public Library, I was shocked with new things that I was able to learn about my family. Out of the countless clippings that I found from newspapers, I saw my Great-Aunt Sue's name with a quote from her regarding the Chapel. With the help of the librarians I also found an interview from my Great-Great-Aunt Elma, who had signed the Chapel over to

Fairfax County. With my mother at my side, I read the tales that ‘Aunt Elma’ told regarding her connection to the Chapel. It was one of the most special and interesting things that I did while researching the Chapel, because I got to hear accounts that were told by someone who was no longer there to tell them.

I also found more information about the deed that Oliver Besley drew up with Wakefield and the other trustees of the land. Wakefield Chapel was to be used as a Methodist Church for only two Sundays every month, while other denominations could use the church for services any other days. The mission that my family had in the church was to spread the word of God in whatever way possible.

My grandfather took me to Wakefield Chapel to take a look around. With a camera in hand I took pictures of the land that my family grew up around. While spending time with my grandfather, stories were passed on to me as he began to recall the many things that he had experienced around the Chapel. He remembered running past the adjoining graveyard across the street from the Chapel because of the countless ghost stories he had heard. He reminisced about sneaking into the Chapel and ringing the bell with his siblings. So many things were told to me, and I was touched to learn about a piece of my past.

While at Wakefield Chapel, I walked across the street to take a picture. I found myself in the graveyard, right next to the gravestone of Oliver Besley and his wife Mary. Though I learned that the gravestone had been knocked down, it was now erect. I was overwhelmed that I could visit a place where someone from my past was buried. Even more exciting and special to me was the marker in front of the Chapel where Oliver

Besley is mentioned. I feel honored to share a name with someone who was so obviously such an outstanding citizen to the Braddock Area.

Many more people from my family have found themselves drawn to the Church. My Aunt Kellie had a wedding ceremony there which my family attended. I found that Wakefield Chapel has been a huge part of my life for longer than I could have known. When talking to the other members of my family, I heard so many stories that made me laugh about the sneaking into the Chapel; about the bats in the steeple, and about ringing the bell they were forbidden to touch. I heard of a potbelly stove, a steeple ladder, and a dark alter.

The Chapel was obviously important to the generations of my family that I had never met nor heard about, and it was so touching to learn about my past in relation to the area in which I live. My ancestors made significant contributions to the Braddock Area, which are still being celebrated today with every wedding that takes place in the Chapel, and with every research essay written about it. After the Civil War, in a time when unity was scarce, the Chapel helped create and promote a sense of community in the Braddock Area. When the county saved the Chapel, they saved a piece of my past, a place of stories and of laughs, and now a place of the future.

Work Cited

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<<http://www.co.fairfax.va.us/parks/hprs/wakefieldchapel.htm>.